



Preliminary Assessment of the Moldovan Parliament February 2006

Summary

The March 2005 parliamentary elections in Moldova opened a window of opportunity for the national legislature to become a key agent of democratization and European integration. At the same time, some parliamentary procedures and institutions are ill-suited to supporting a more robust legislature. Equally if not more important, many current members of parliament and legislative staff lack the skills and expertise to pursue the internal reforms that would make the parliament a more active political force.

In early November 2005, NDI/Moldova organized a preliminary assessment of the staff of the Moldovan Parliament by two Baltic experts, Anita Dudina of Latvia and Renate Blagniene of Lithuania. This activity was part of a broader effort aimed at analyzing the current needs of the parliament, identifying areas where NDI and IRI might assist the parliament in realizing its potential in Moldova's new political circumstances, facilitating the absorption of other assistance projects, and developing channels of communication to the parliament.

This report summarizes Ms. Dudina's and Ms. Blagniene's findings (their full report is attached) together with NDI's own observations and seeks to lay the groundwork for NDI's longer-term parliamentary assistance programs. NDI additionally hopes that the recommendations can help inform the parliamentary assistance programs of IRI and other international organizations.

Background

The March 2005 parliamentary elections in Moldova opened a window of opportunity for the national legislature to become a key agent of democratization and European integration. The Communist Party preserved a majority, but it compromised with some reformist groups formerly in opposition on a set of democratic reforms in order to retain the presidency. The parliament as an institution now enjoys political leverage that it has not previously exercised. Also, around the time of the elections, President Voronin unambiguously declared Moldova's intention to seek integration within Europe. This goal provides both incentives and a framework for reform efforts. In order to join the European Union, Moldova will need to conform to the *Acquis Communautaire*, a set of treaty obligations and legislation to which all EU member states must adhere. Several aspects of this package deal directly or indirectly with democratic reforms.

At the same time, the challenges facing the parliament are substantial. The legislature lacks the institutional capacity to meet some of the new demands now being placed on it. Many current members of parliament and legislative staff lack the skills and expertise to pursue the internal reforms that would make the parliament a more active political force or to craft and ensure passage of the necessary legislation. The legislature tends to defer to the executive branch, rather than holding it accountable. Also, the parliament will need to mobilize popular Moldovan support for democratic reforms and entry into Europe. This will be a daunting challenge for an institution that itself lacks widespread public confidence.

As a first step toward analyzing the specific needs of the parliament and assessing the opportunities for assistance, NDI in November 2005 invited Anita Dudina of Latvia and Renate Blagniene of Lithuania to conduct a review. Ms. Dudina is Director of the Information Department of the Saeima (Parliament) of the Republic of Latvia. She is also a member of the Standing Committee of the international Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments and has been a project manager on behalf of the Saeima for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) project, "Improvement of Management and Administration of the Latvian Parliament." Ms. Dudina has 15 years' experience working in a parliament that underwent a transition from a Soviet system to a democracy. Similarly, Ms. Blagniene is director of the Information Department of the Lithuanian Parliament. She has served on the parliament's staff since 1993 and participated in the Special Task force on the Development of Parliamentary Institutions in Eastern Europe as well as a Library of Congress training in the U.S. and several programs in the Swedish parliament.

Ms. Dudina and Ms. Blagniene spent five days in Moldova. Their primary contact was Stela Jantuan, head of the Information Analysis and Forecast Service. The experts also met Advisor to the Speaker Mariana Zolotco and both Vice Speakers, Maria Postoico (Communist party) and Jurie Rosca (Christian Democratic People's Party). In addition, the experts talked with heads of all the departments of the parliamentary staff, including the Library. Their observations and recommendations focused primarily but not exclusively on the parliamentary staff.

Key Challenges

The parliament of 101 members is supported by 195 staff members. These employees work in parliamentary factions, standing committees, and a central administration. The staff of the central administration, which is divided into eight units, is referred to as the "apparat." The apparat is theoretically headed by a director general, but this position has been vacant since the spring of 2005. The lack of authoritative yet nonpartisan leadership has created a number of problems and contributed to others. There is no clear strategy for parliamentary development, no shared operating standards, little coordination among the eight apparat departments, and a dearth of information about parliamentary procedures and developments throughout the building.

The Information, Analysis and Forecast Service is one of the central units within the apparatus, not least because it has close informal ties to the speaker. The Service is currently focusing on ambitious plans to produce impact analyses of pieces of legislation and to prepare strategies and forecasts for the speaker. The Information Service is also responsible for public relations, but is not yet concentrating on this area. Meanwhile, neither the Information Service nor any other unit of the central administration has assumed responsibility for the basic tasks of conducting research or providing committees with information related to proposed legislation. As a result, committees and individual MPs have access to few resources to support their legislative initiatives.

The parliament is short on many material resources that are common in more established democratic parliaments. The Information Service's library, for example, is small, underfunded and poorly-stocked. Offices lack adequate computers and software. MPs lack personal assistants and transportation for traveling within the country to meet constituents. Staff lack training in foreign and particularly European languages.

Another issue is the parliament's limited exposure to the West. The staff is unfamiliar with EU legislation and procedures. Throughout the parliament, fluency with democratic norms, parliamentary rules of procedure, separation of powers in a parliamentary republic, and the role and functions of a parliament is limited.

Finally, the Moldovan public expresses little confidence in the parliament. This popular skepticism is probably more a holdover from the past than a reflection on the current body, but it is a liability nonetheless.

Recommendations for Assistance

The objectives of international assistance to the Moldovan parliament should include:

- Strengthening parliamentary oversight of the executive;
- Enhancing the credibility of the parliament among Moldovans;
- Increasing the capacity of the parliament to pass legislation that is aligned with European norms; and
- Helping the parliament build public support for European integration.

To reach these objectives, NDI recommends the following general categories of activities:

1. MPs and staff should receive training on EU structures, functions, legislation and procedures. As a complement to training workshops, MPs and staff should be given the opportunity to participate in study missions to European parliaments and international organizations, and to develop ongoing working relationships with their peers.
2. The parliamentary leadership should be encouraged to appoint a nonpartisan director general with responsibility for conveying a mission and vision for

- parliamentary development, clarifying the functions and priorities of the parliament and coordinating the activities of the various units within the apparat. Skills training, support for strategic planning, and meetings with international counterparts should be provided to the director general when he or she is named.
3. Parliamentary leaders or the new director general should be encouraged to assign responsibility to a single apparat unit for conducting research and providing information to MPs and committees. This would most logically be the Information Service. Skills training, strategic planning support and meetings with international counterparts should be offered to the Service staff.
 4. Parliamentary leaders or the new director general should be encouraged to assign responsibility to a single apparat unit for outreach to the public. This would most logically be the Press Service. Training for staff and study visits should be arranged to support the development of an outreach strategy that might include, among other things, organized tours of the parliament building, printed materials and a user-friendly website.
 5. The apparat staff responsible for public outreach should receive training in methods for distributing nonpartisan information about the work of the parliament (including general information, minutes, text of bills and laws, and committee schedules, among other items), thereby increasing the institution's transparency to the Moldovan public.
 6. Each apparat unit should be reorganized to better match the actual needs and priorities of the parliament.
 7. The parliamentary leadership should be encouraged and trained to draw on the resources of issue-oriented NGOs for setting legislative priorities, initiating and analyzing legislation, and building public support. At the same time, NGOs should be trained on issue advocacy skills.
 8. MPs, committees, factions and apparat offices should get increased access to improved computers, software and other information technology equipment. A parliamentary intranet should be developed. Apparatus staff should have access to language and IT training.
 9. The parliamentary library's holding should be increased and updated, with a particular focus on European legislation, treaties and other documents. The library should develop an electronic catalogue.

Based on its relative expertise and programmatic strengths, NDI would be best-suited to providing assistance and training on comparative legislative practices (no. 1), supporting a director general in articulating and implementing a parliamentary development strategy (no. 2), public outreach (nos. 4 and 5), and cooperation with NGOs (no. 7). NDI hopes that other international organizations can be encouraged to focus assistance on the remaining topics, including information and library services, reorganization of the apparatus units, provision of material resources, and enhancing the library.